

The Lighthouse for Blinded Soldiers
by
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By Winifred Holt

FOUNDER OF THE NEW YORK ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

FOR many years the good Abbé Moureau had directed a little group of industrial blind workers. His quarters were situated in part of an old church in Bordeaux. In fair weather the blind workers caned chairs in the cloister. In the midst of the cloister was a patch of wild garden where a white donkey had a foretaste of heaven.

Suddenly the war came, blasting this peaceful scene. Although there were more blind men than ever before to be cared for, the resources of the abbé dwindled and dwindled until he even sold his wonderful collection of butterflies to keep his blind patients busy.

I had just landed in Bordeaux and helped by letters from the French ambassador and the Red Cross started at once to see how the Committee for Men Blinded in Battle could supplement the government's efforts in behalf of blind soldiers. I discovered the abbé, heard about his struggle, and immediately realized that here was our first opportunity for helpfulness. With funds remitted from my committee in New York, it did not take long to persuade the abbé to take over the re-education of men blinded in battle who were sent to the Bordeaux hospitals. His "Comité" was

reorganized to help locally while we assisted by giving them games, writing tools, materials, and the like. Now it has bought a charming old chateau where there are forty beds for convalescent blind as well as classrooms, workshops, and living rooms. There are beautiful grounds with yew trees and old rose bushes about the chateau. In the midst of the flowers stands a statue of Jeanne d'Arc, holding her standard. The blind men say that she, their patron saint, will lead them through their battle in the dark to victory and light. The abbé even changed the name of his hostel from *Les Travailleurs du Sud-Ouest* (workers of the southwest) to *Le Phare de Bordeaux* (the Bordeaux lighthouse).

Our flame of hope for the blind soldiers of France thus kindled at Bordeaux

*I*N the first row of the picture above, a young French lieutenant, blinded in battle, holds the seal of the French lighthouse, patterned on its famous predecessor in New York city. Miss Holt stands in the second row, next to the soldier holding the flag.

has spread rapidly. Shortly, we established our home teaching and classes for re-education at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris where we started a census bureau and had the privilege of giving over 30,000 francs to other organizations working for the blind, good proof that the keystone of our labors is always cooperation. We have also given away over 4,000 gifts, including a radiograph, machines, tools, games, delicacies, etc.

When the work increased, the government offered us a beautiful palace for headquarters, but when it came to signing the last papers we found that the property which has been requisitioned from an Austrian prince might be taken from us at short notice.

We therefore rented our present building 14 Rue Daru, Paris, from the pope. The only stipulation is that we accept English and Belgian as well as French soldiers. Since the former are provided for excellently at St. Dunstan's we probably will have none among our pensioners. But on the continent, we are as far as we know, the only college for the re-education of the blind. The work is under the High Patronage of the President of the Republic, the American Ambassador and the Ministers of War, Marine, Interior and Public Instruction.

We are dependent on the Department of the Interior and the Ministry of War who subsidize us.

Here at the *Phare de France* the demand for our hospitality is great. Among our guests we have a commandant; two captains, four lieutenants, several adjutants and regular soldiers. We accept, here, however, only soldiers of superior intelligence and of sufficient education to profit by the opportunities we offer. It is our plan to give a soldier, who has acquired "ten eyes on his finger tips" and enough knowledge to make him reasonably independent, the necessary tools and materials to follow his calling at home or to send him into other centers of work where he, in turn, can teach his unfortunate comrades.

Thus, we have one captain who, we might say, belongs to our correspondence school. We have given him a typewriter and while he is now studying by himself, we expect soon to have him with us for a short course at the French lighthouse. Another pupil, a lieutenant who stayed two months with us, was recently married. We gave him an Underwood typewriter for a wedding present. He is now on his wedding trip, but expects to return to the *phare* for a sort of "post-graduate course."

In addition to our residents we have day-pensioners who take their meals at the lighthouse and follow the entire day's program, and also men who merely attend special classes.

Among the subjects taught at the *phare*, of course, Braille, typewriting and stenography are the most popular as well as the most necessary since this is the knowledge that will unite the blind with the world of their fellows. Indeed, our special commercial course is such a success that the men would rather miss the theater than that hour.

The arts and crafts school is also popular. Many of the men feel that it is a great advantage for them to have industrial as well as intellectual equipment. We have reconstructed a former stable, making it into an excellent workshop where the men weave, operate knitting machines, or busy themselves with the printing-press which has just been installed. Modeling, too, is popular and a great help in educating the sense of touch.

Still another method of making touch more sensitive is through a small museum containing statues, practical machinery, tools and appliances which the men may study at their leisure. A recent exhibit of the work done by mutilated soldiers included our exhibit of very beautiful pottery, weaving, statues and other objects of art. It was the best possible demonstration of the intelligence, perseverance and enthusiasm of these new recruits of light through work.

But all work and no play makes blind Jack a dull boy too. Every morning the men have gymnastics and sports of which

they are very fond and which they say puts them in good condition for "real work." Fencing is one of their chief sports and their professor, who "is one of the most renowned fencing masters in Paris, brings to his work an enthusiasm which enables him to obtain astonishing results.

We have organized a blind man's club, of which Pierre Villey, the famous blind professor at Caen, is an honorary president. Various entertainments are given, the Théâtre Français puts good seats at our disposal every week and we have a box at the Opéra. In fact it is often through games and amusements that the man's confidence is won and his interest in life reawakened.

For example, I was recently taken by an American Ambulance doctor to a patient from Verdun. He had lost his sight, his right arm and was otherwise wounded. All I could do was to talk to him at the doctor's request and to give him an idea of light through work.

On my second visit I introduced him to an American checker-board adapted for the blind. He consented to play and finally beat me in a game of checkers. He was so pleased at his success that all his boyish sense of fun returned and he giggled with glee until the nurse was afraid he would reopen his wounds. He is now learning Braille and other simple things and is a regular pupil of our home teacher.

The lighthouse staff is admirable. It is headed by a French lady, with a writer of some distinction, as director. We have five professors who are themselves blind—two, refugees from Arras and organists of note. The remainder of our teaching staff is sighted. At present, we have no Americans, excepting among the volunteers. In its small clinic the lighthouse has the benefit of

the advice and constant aid of two well-known French physicians, and, as visiting physician, of Dr. Scarlett, director of the American Hospital at Neuilly and director of the ophthalmological department of the American Ambulance.

In addition we have home teachers who give instruction in the hospitals and in the homes of the *reformé* soldiers. The home teachers' duties are by no means restricted to teaching, however. To give in hospitals and home the first consolation and knowledge of a possible horizon of light for the blind is perhaps the most important task of these emissaries.

A doctor telephones that a new man has come from the front, blind, hopeless, and in need of light. The home teacher goes to him and shows him a new horizon in blindness.

Often the cases are so pathetic that words seem useless. A Zouave, strong and handsome before the war, came back, carried like a little child, with no eyes, no legs and only one arm. But when he discovered that he could read with his left arm he was eager to come to Paris and learn how to be blind. He actually laughed aloud with the idea of his being able to be a wage-earner again and to marry the little girl who was his fiancée and still remained faithful to him.

Another man with no eyes or arms we were able to help principally through his wife, a valiant soul, from whom we have offered to buy all the vegetables she raises. We are in hope, too, that we may discover some simple occupation for the man when articulated arms are fitted to him.

Several of our pupils are already self-supporting. One, in six months, returned to his retail business which he conducts with such entire success, writing all letters and keeping accounts, that he has been forced recently to remove to larger quarters.

Another man in two months, was educated to write excellent typewritten letters and keep his accounts. He became a machine knitter and turns out such excellent work that he has more orders than he can fill.

So it goes on, this work of moulding these heroic men into self-helpful citizens. To weigh its worth one only has to see the look of hope that comes back to their faces and to hear their words of gratitude.

"I would like to be a poet to sing to you of my rebirth," wrote one soldier to me, "but alas! I am neither poet nor writer, only a peasant. . . . Thanks to you, and to the good teachers about you, I can say without exaggeration that I feel glowing within me a light that throws its rays into the closed chamber of a spirit which I believed would forever live in darkness. At the Lighthouse of France I have found the light."



A blind Swede learning to model at the French lighthouse. Although he has lost both eyes in a war which did not involve his country, he said with a bright smile: "I should have at least done that for France." He has been decorated with the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille Militaire.

